VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

U N I V E R S I T Y O F D A L L A S

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How can one give a valedictory address at the University of Dallas? How can a single member of this graduating class possibly account for all that he alone has experienced, all that he has been given and has shared in? Let alone, to speak for all of you! Perhaps I should take advice from my good friend John Donne and make it a Valediction Forbidding Mourning; for indeed the place has been for many of us a beloved almost equal to one of Dr. Donne's. We have matured as it has grown; it has raised a tower to salute us, and a mall and graduate building to hold us; its woods have provided us unlimited opportunities to return to nature - nourished by the issue of countless kegs. We have all grown together in a community of friendship and affection that is soon to endure only in our hearts.

It is not, however, the community that I wish to celebrate this morning; that can be done better with less talk and more gemutlichkeit. Instead, I would like to recall to our attention some of the peculiarities of this place, in the face of what we might have encountered elsewhere. A few days ago I began to think of what graduation speeches at other colleges might be like this spring. More than likely, impassioned rhetoric will pour forth on the urgency of withdrawal from Viet Nam and Cambodia; or perhaps the topic will be our duty to the ravaged environment;

or the black movement, or the student movement, or a host of other issues with which I could have some genuine familiarity only through the dark glass of the television camera. I had better not attempt any musings on these burning issues, because I don't think I could tell you anything new. My copies of Time and Newsweek read no differently from yours. And anyway, I suspect that there is some fallacy behind such quick universalizing, not merely in commencement addresses, which we accept as satisfying and soon-forgotten occasions, but in the psychic motivation behind many of the gatherings and skirmishes which have taken place on other campuses. There seems to be an a priori condition to the rationality that "the world" means something not here but elsewhere, a set of situations not given to the sensibility through experience but filtered through report or rumor.

Speakers at the University of Dallas, on the other hand, especially on public occasions, often concentrate on the seemingly narrow issue of the meaning of education, and, more specifically, on the state of this university with regard to that meaning. Thus, they open themselves to accusations of a kind of reverse fallacy - namely, that "the world" consists solely in the thousand acres that make up the UD campus, and no facious forces outside it demand our concern.

Of course, the world is neither here nor there, but all around us, ever-present and inescapable except by a perverse refusal of the will. When we leave the classrooms we shall neither go out into the world, nor shall we be saying goodbye to it. Instead, we shall be leaving a set of reasonably idealized conditions

which have allowed most of us to be as free as we can possibly be - and I say "idealized" because I mean that a university is intended to be a model of the world, not as the world is in fireiness and contrariety, but as it might be in freedom and harmony.

When a man wants to learn about something, he will likely construct a model of it; and that model need not correspond point-by-point to the mystery he wants to understand; it is enough that the model resemble it only roughly, and that it work reasonably well. A university is meant to be an imitation, not of external society but of one ideal aspect of the human community. This means it is not autonomous, of course: food is not grown on its acreage nor is brick baked there for its buildings. But despite its existence as a non-profit institution, an entity dependent on the leniency of society for its maintenance, we may observe a certain autonomy in the affairs of its students: they are free to pursue the truth without running the risk of damaging society or being damaged by it. The outrage and the hard facts of life are not suppressed there, but brought to a level of abstraction where they may be examined safely - for it is a place, according to Newman, where "rashness is rendered innocuous." A student may rarely be conscious of his freedom as long as he is permitted to exercise it; most of the time spent studying is undercut by a longing for a few moments of liberated revelry. But the freedom that revelry affords is short-lived; it becomes oppressive and exhausting after at the most a week of it (speaking from experience). And the tedium that accompanies study and research is in no way

to be attributed to its result, which is always a clearing of the air befouled by ignorance, an illumination of darkness, an unremovable feeling of liberation from the tyranny of facts.

This is the function of such a model of the world. We seem to be given no indication of this concept, however, by the events occuring at many colleges; often it seems that students and administrations alike see their role as something like that of a lobbyist, who intends to bring about direct and radical social change by causing political pressure. I do not disagree that America needs a radical change of some sort, and the sooner the better; but it is the function of at least the intellectual leaders, if not of all men, to consider what kind of society certain changes might lead to, before plunging headlong into instigation. Universities now seem to want to turn out men trained in "practical" studies only, or scholars who are only specialists - men in any case incapable of considering the general values of society. The student activists, on the other hand, equate non-instigation with copping out. What is made imminent by these two opposing forces is the obliteration of the student's option to discover that contemplative mode of life which is the only way to understanding and which, far from being inactive, is a vital form of human activity, what Aristotle called "the highest kind of activity."

Andrew Lytle, in a talk given on campus a few days ago, employed the brilliant image of the Minotaur to characterize the prevalent contemporary state of mind - a creature which retains the frail, hairless, odorless human body, but is commanded by the

head of a bull, thereby brutalized in sensibility and acting only on the dictation of the appetite of the moment. Such action, because it is not rooted in a ground of continuous consideration, is destructive, egoistic, factious, motivated by interests which are both momentary and "non-negotiable" - Robert Penn Warren has called this "The Great Twitch"; we might term it the Spasmodic Mode of Action.

An alternative mode - the contemplative - moves not toward immediate action, but toward understanding situations by incorporating them into schemes which represent the whole human person, both sensorium and sensibility. These models may be original or inherited; thus, the contemplative mode is not necessarily esoteric or abstruse, but is available to all men as a place of residence for the mind, a haven of sanity and perspective temporarily free from the urgency of time. This mode is the source of responsible action and thus of all true heroism. In the past it seemed to reside in the soil itself, and to show itself as a shared body of settled instincts - a habitus - tested and proven in the experience of the community. Technological societies, however, are at present unsettled; they have lost the old habitus and failed as yet to acquire a new one. The memory of the past has faded; thus heroic action, which is often devious and paradoxical, remains no less obscure. The task of finding a contemporary habitus for action is thereby related to the task of reclaiming the past. This is one way in which our university has built a frame of mind in each of us. By presenting the past as crucial rather than trivial, as causally connected with the

present rather than divorced from it, the University has imposed a degree of order on our view of the tumultuous present. We now know that the past is not full of unimaginable barbarism, but replete with achievement and harmony of kinds to which we cannot return but which we can and must admire and emulate.

Perhaps more important than the sense of continuity we have received is a certain attitude which we will exercise, consciously or not, and outwardly or not, for the rest of our lives. This is the critical sense, a certain perspective which provides for the autonomy of the personal intellect. It means that no one can ever make up our minds for us, that henceforth we can never in good conscience remain silent and thoughtless under the tyranny of public opinion-makers. We are able to test the validity of any scheme or object placed before us, merely by its internal construction. This is our primary settled instinct; the critical function is our main habitus.

Thanks to what we have learned here, the wisdom achieved by Christianity in history, and by the cultures of the West, their thoughts and their actions, their science and their art, is now ours for the future not as a deterministic limit, but as a background for comparison, so that we need never feel the overpowering anguish of being, as Sartre claimed to be, "abandoned in the world." We owe our gratitude to the whole university for the four years of experience it took to shape and mature in us a continuous vision of the world. Our loyalty, however, is not to the alma mater, but to the world, both as it is now, struggling, and as we have glimpsed it here in beauty.

In a sense, our situation here has been most anti-establishment, since we have been allowed to refrain from entering into the dialectic with the banality of industrialism, and have instead persisted in the simple assertion that the contemplative way of life is still possible and desirable. We have not had to oppose the established bureaucracy; nor have we been forced to surrender high standards under the guise of seeking equality for all. A great part of the world into which we shall enter denies the presence of God in us, has forgotten about the existence of virtues, and no longer cares for the quality of its actions or its products. In this setting, we will be marked men. It will be difficult to hide the pecularity of our way of acting, for it is something residual in us. Those who recognize a principle of unity in the world will always be discernible from those who acknowledge only facious interests. In addition, the mere fact of our diplomas will mean that we are called on to lead, to give guidance, to witness in many ways, most of them small and almost imperceptible, to some attitude toward the world. We can then choose either to retreat, to capitulate, to deny meaning because it is painful, to affirm the secular bureaucracy or to accede to anarchy; or to say the unexpected, often the unwanted, in testimony to a remembered and still fresh vision of the world.